

When an Elder Doesn't Eat Enough – What You Can Do

There are many factors that can affect a senior's desire to eat - from loneliness and depression, to illness and medication, and physical changes like diminished taste, smell and dental. Over time, inadequate nourishment can weaken the immune system, negatively impact existing health problems and contribute to mental confusion. The tips below have been adapted from MayoClinic.com. For more information, please see <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/senior-health/HA00066>

- Make meals social events – drop by during mealtime or invite seniors to your house. Or try eating out on a regular basis, which can boost spirits along with appetite.
- If you can't share meals with the older adults in your life, encourage them to join programs where they can eat with others or arrange for them to have meals with friends.
- Enrich an elder's sparse diet. To boost nutrition, encourage seniors to spread peanut or other nut butters on crackers and fruit and add cheese to eggs, sandwiches, vegetables, etc.
- Restore life to bland food. Make special diets more appealing by using lemon juice, herbs and spices and by varying the texture, color and temperature of foods. If loss of taste and smell is a problem, experiment with strong seasonings and flavors.
- Plan between-meal snacks – especially for people who get full quickly. A piece of fruit or cheese, a spoonful of peanut butter, even a milkshake for people who aren't lactose intolerant can add nutrients and calories.
- Use nutritional supplements appropriately. Supplements are important because they can help supply missing nutrients, but they can't provide protein or needed calories and shouldn't become a substitute for meals.
- If an older adult is very frail, consider hiring a home health aide to help prepare meals or investigate Meals-On-Wheels and other community services, including home visits from registered dietitians.
- Talk to doctors about changing medications that affect appetite and nutritional status and about screening for nutrition problems during routine office visits. Be sure to inform doctors if you notice that an older adult is losing weight.
- Consult a dentist about oral pain or chewing problems.
- Encourage regular exercise, which stimulates appetite, help fight depression, and strengthens bones and muscles. Exercising with others also provides motivation and social interaction.